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Listen to Their Teachers' Voices: Effective Reading Instruction for Fourth Grade African American Students

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Abstract

This study identifies effective teaching methods that can enhance the reading skills of fourth grade African American students. Focus group interviews were conducted with 21 teachers. The teachers identified independent reading and writing, phonics and vocabulary, teacher modeling, the use of multicultural materials, engagement of parental involvement, incorporating prior knowledge, and cooperative learning as the methods they believed were most effective with this group of African American fourth grade students. This study provides a voice for educators. These findings also offer support for prior research, which has suggested that these methods are significant to enhance the reading skills of African American students.

Though much has been learned about the ways to enhance literacy, we have often failed to make these methods available to African American students, especially those in the inner cities (Dougherty, 1997). In the United States, too many "struggling readers" are African American students and other students of color (Hoover & Fabian, 2000). According to data from the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 4.5 million fourth grade African American students read below the basic level. Strickland (1994) explained that many at-risk students are African American and live in poverty. She added that education cannot solve all the African American students' problems, but education is an effective weapon against poverty and crime. To reach these students, educators must expand their repertoire of instructional methods to encompass the various approaches these students use to learn. Many of the effective methods needed by these students are derived from their African heritage, explains Kuykendall (1992). Improving the quality of classroom instruction is the best and most cost-effective means of improving overall student achievement and preventing at-risk students from falling behind (Slavin & Fashola, 1998, p. 33). Researchers should continue to identify pedagogy that enhances the reading skills of these students (Dilworth, 1992).

Unfortunately, some researchers seldom involve classroom teachers as a source of guidance and their voices are too often ignored. Teachers, according to Delpit (1995), particularly believe that their voices are not heard concerning the education of African American students. For many years classroom teachers have known intuitively what creates successful classroom experiences. Now there is a growing body of research that supports their intuitive knowledge, and many teachers who know the research are able to articulate why they do what they do (Sierra – Perry, 1996, p. xii). In this research project, I decided to listen to the voices of a select group of classroom teachers concerning the enhancement of reading skills for African American students and offer their pedagogical insights.

Purpose and Research Question

My purpose was to identify effective teaching methods, as identified by selected elementary school teachers, which enhanced the

reading abilities of African American fourth grade students. I was also interested in determining the validity of certain methods identified through a review of the research and where appropriate encourage their use by teachers of African American fourth grade students. The following research question guided this study: What are the effective teaching methods which enhance the literacy of African American students in fourth grade as perceived by fourth grade elementary teachers?

Procedures Used to Collect and Analyze the Data

Schools and Participants

I chose schools located in northeast Texas which have a significant number of African American students who are experiencing success in reading regardless of background; this district consists of 52.1% African American students. Based on the state test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), and the district's Benchmarks, there is documentation that African American students in this district are experiencing success in reading. The African American fourth grade students score above 80% on the reading section of TAAS. Twenty-one fourth grade teachers from four elementary schools, from diverse backgrounds, participated in this study. Teachers, identified by their principals, were chosen because of their experience and success educating fourth grade students. Based on student academic engagement and classroom reading performances, these teachers were chosen and their instruction analyzed. The teachers had an average of nine years of teaching experience.

Research Method and Analyzing the Data

I selected a qualitative, naturalistic research design for this study. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), qualitative research methods are becoming important methods of inquiry for certain fields of study such as the field of education. Better understanding of complex human interactions is gained through this alternate research process. Further qualitative inquiry permits the researcher to enter the field with little advance conceptualization (Patton, 1990).

Focus group interviews of teachers were selected as the primary source of data because they are open-ended interviews with groups of five to eight people on specifically targeted issues (Patton, 1990). Focus groups bring together people of similar experiences to participate in a group interview about a major issue that affects them. Patton acknowledged that group interviews provide a way to accumulate the individual knowledge of their members. They provide insights into the individual and personal experience of each educator participating in the study. Probes provided the elaborate depth needed, facts, interest, and clarification as noted by Rubin and Rubin (1995). Evidence probes provide the source of the interviewee's knowledge and steering probes assisted in keeping the interview on the right track (Rubin & Rubin).

Teachers initially participated in focus group interviews on four elementary campuses. All fourth grade teachers were invited to participate on each of the elementary campuses. The teachers were asked by the researcher, at the beginning of each of the four interviews to reflect and identify methods that they used on a consistent basis that they believed enhanced the reading skills of their African American students. They were also encouraged to expound on their statements. Participants in the focus groups listened to each other's responses and made comments, which allowed for flexibility, the exploration of issues, and shared impressions during discussion (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Obtaining high-quality data in a social context was the object of the focus group interviews. These interviews were recorded via audiotape over the course of two months; interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes and concepts. Analyses during data collection also employed the coding of data according to emerging categories of behaviors. Overarching themes were developed to link individual parts together and patterns emerged from the analysis of previous data. Recurring methods were tallied according to their frequency of discussion. Instructional methods had to be discussed at least six times to be included in this study. There were a few methods that were discussed by one teacher but were not included in this study. Patterns emerged leading to the use of the criterion number of 6; this number was the apparent point of differentiation (see Table 1). The table below lists the methods and the frequency of discussion by teachers in this study

who found them to be of value. All 21 teachers shared that they used all the methods listed in the table.

Table 1. Effective Reading Methods

Methods	Frequency of Discussion by Teachers
Independent reading & Writing	39
Phonics & Vocabulary	20
Modeling	11
Multicultural Education	9
Parental Involvement	8
Prior Knowledge/Schema	7
Cooperative Learning	6

Characteristics of Effective Reading Instruction

Introduction

Each of the methods discussed below were identified both by teachers in this study and in my review of research as effective methods for enhancing the reading ability of fourth grade African American students. The 21 teachers in this study have attended staff development/training on the methods they discussed in this study; these methods are used daily and integrated into the curriculum. Also, materials to support the implementation of the methods are purchased for each of the four schools.

Independent Reading and Writing Experiences

Independent Reading and Writing were the most frequently discussed methods during the interviews. Clay (p. 6, 1991) defines reading as a "message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced." During independent reading and writing, students are in charge of their own reading and writing; they choose what to read and what topics they will write about.

One assignment we had in our journals in my classroom, we write down idioms and figures of speech that helps to make a story look more colorful.

I observed that teachers in this study used a variety of motivational programs to encourage their students to read and write independently. According to Hoover and Fabian (2000), their students write every day for a purpose such as creating books for younger students. This motivated the students to write. Listen to the teachers' voices on this important point:

We did the Emmitt Smith Reading Program. A little boy on our campus won a football. You could have won a visit from Emmitt Smith (Dallas Cowboy Football Player).

Another motivational thing that we use is the 600 Minute Club and they get a free ticket to Six Flags. They work really hard to get their free ticket.

One of the new strategies we started using last year with our classes is Readers Workshop in which children read books of their choosing at their own level.

Teacher Modeling

Teacher modeling, a form of scaffolding and gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), is a way of demonstrating to students how to approach a task. During modeling, the teacher thinks aloud while talking and revealing her mental strategies in solving reading problems. Teachers should model how to analyze, to think in a logical manner, and to process ideas (Gordon, 1990 & Hill, 1989). The Reading Recovery teachers in this school work with the 4th grade teachers coaching them on effective modeling strategies. Cunningham and Allington (1994) noted that fourth grade teachers should model reading by reading to their students. These authors continued to explain that if a teacher multiplies the five or six times she models reading for her students by 180 school days, she has modeled that reading is a source of

information, pleasure, and humor over 1000 times for that school year. Our teachers spoke quite plainly about the importance of modeling:

When I started reading it I started modeling for her what I was gaining from it and then she started getting what she needed to get from it because she saw what I was doing.

We model as we've discussed before the voice and intonation in reading.

Oral daily reading by the teacher will give life experiences and present examples; this helps build vocabulary in students.

Cooperative Learning

Social interaction has a significant role in developing students' cognitive growth. This is extremely relevant to current trends in reading instruction. Cooperative learning groups help students to synthesize information in a collaborative way. Slavin (1991) found that students' achievement, self-concept, and social skills were enhanced when they participated in cooperative learning groups. Research on cooperative learning practices reveals that students achieve more when working in groups rather than working individually or in competitive situations (Dilworth, 1992 & Kuykendall, 1992). Each of the teachers who participated in Ladson-Billings (1994) study used some type of cooperative learning technique in their classrooms. The teachers participating in the study encouraged their students to work within a collective study. According to Irvine (1989), there is significant evidence in the literature that African American students achieve better when they work together rather than alone. Here are just two of the teachers' voices that advocate cooperative learning for African American students:

I even let them do their questions together and discuss them for a few minutes.

It was because they have that one-on-one with someone that was their peer. They weren't threatened; they felt very comfortable in the situation.

Prior Knowledge (Schema)

Reutzel and Cooter (1996, p. 38) defined schema (prior knowledge) as packages of related concepts, events, or experiences such as reading the word furniture, readers activate their knowledge related to furniture. A schema can be considered an abstract, flexible, and growing cognitive framework with slots that can be filled in by the reader's personal and vicarious experiences (Piaget, 1955). Rumelhart (1980) explains that schemas are the basic foundation of cognitive development. It has been determined by researchers that when students know a great amount about a subject they tend to accurately recall more of the information from reading than do students with little or no background knowledge (Carr & Thompson, 1996).

The background knowledge of African American students can be quite varied. These teachers used literature to assist their students in the enhancement of their background knowledge. Comprehension can be hindered if students lack the schema concerning a particular topic (Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979). The teachers in our study said this about enhancing background knowledge in their students:

They build background from the literature.

Connectors are what they need.

In the direct teach method, I know discovery and all those kinds of things are fun and I'm not saying that you don't do that but the best way or what works best is if you do the direct teach, to give them the background.

Multicultural Education / Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Harris (1997) is convinced that the reading achievement of African American students would improve if they could see themselves and other

people of color and their experiences, history, and culture reflected in the books they read. Efforts are emerging to bring people together and not apart. Multicultural education is bridging the gap between all people and can potentially offer a better understanding of the people who live in this world. Conversely, the absence of multicultural education in the curriculum implicitly suggests that African Americans' culture and history are irrelevant and inferior (Wyman, 1993). Multicultural literature strengthens the development of self-esteem and enhances the school achievement of these students (Harris, 1997).

Involving students on a regular basis with books that reflect the perspectives of different members of our American culture helps students to value different voices (Sierra-Perry, 1996, p. 90). The teachers in this study have also chosen to integrate their multicultural literature throughout the curriculum:

My students have a variety of books.

I buy books that discuss different people and cultures.

Our Social Studies and Science is primarily based on literature with Trade books. We use a lot of multicultural literature. As we study the history of Texas, we include the literature that discusses the different ethnic groups in Texas and how they came to be.

Culturally relevant pedagogy involves students in the knowledge - construction process; they must have a sense of ownership of their knowledge, empowering and liberating (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings explained that this pedagogy uses the students' culture to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. She also noted that culturally relevant pedagogy utilizes a variety of teaching methods, such as phonics, cooperative learning, and independent reading to assist all students in developing their literacy abilities without being ridiculed or embarrassed and it provides a link between classroom experiences and the students' everyday lives.

Phonics Instruction

To become skilled readers, students must be able to identify words quickly and accurately. Students must be proficient at decoding words; decoding words involves converting the printed word into spoken language. Adams (1990) described phonics instruction as a teacher working with a group of students to initiate them directly into written language by revealing its code. Learning phonics helps students to understand the relationship between letters and sounds and to “break the code” that links the words they hear with the words they see in print (U. S. Department of Education, 1986). Collins (1992), who has experienced great success with African American students, places great emphasis on phonics as part of her teaching approach. One of the teachers, in a study conducted by Ladson-Billings (1994), has experienced success with fourth grade African American students using phonics instruction. Songs, chants, rhymes, stories, and plays are used to enhance the students’ abilities to listen to, manipulate, and discuss the sounds they hear (Hoover & Fabian, 2000). Strickland (1994) stressed that sound/symbol relationship (phonics) should be taught during the reading of interesting, predictable texts and during writing. The teachers in the study use a program of explicit instruction equated with direct instruction, an intense systematic phonics program. These teachers shared insight concerning phonics instruction:

We can’t assume that they have the process (phonics), you have to give them a process by which to figure words out and then pretty much they do okay.

What are the similarities in those words? What are some of the rules that you could apply to those words? We really do make boxes on our notebook paper and put letters together and come up with a rule of why they’re together.

If they don’t have phonics, they need it. I have been doing quite a bit with phonics, particularly suffixes, prefixes, and syllables.

We have them make their own words like automobile – cut the letters – and tell them to make words that have ‘au’ in them.

Vocabulary

According to Nagy (1988) and Stanovich (1986), vocabulary is a highly reliable correlate of reading ability. These teachers carefully considered methods of modifying the curriculum so that all students could acquire strong listening, speaking, and reading vocabularies. Encouraging students to read is an important way for teachers to promote their students’ vocabulary growth (Nagy, 1988). Enhancing vocabulary through content area topics such as Social Studies and Science was a natural and connected way to learn new words and explore their various meanings in the classroom. Good readers have larger vocabularies than poor readers do (McKeown, 1985). The teachers clarified their perspective using these words:

We define words and they use the language of context clues.

To understand the passages on the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), it is very crucial to understand the vocabulary.

Parental Involvement

Parents and families are the first and most important teachers. If families teach a love of learning, it can make all the difference in the world in our children (Richard Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education). It is important for parents to form a partnership with the schools. When parents were not involved, according to a study by the United States Department of Education (1986), fourth grade average reading scores were 46 points below the national average, when parents were involved scores were 28 points above the national average.

The parents and community can assist the school in establishing equitable and respectful learning environments especially for this minority population. A partnership between schools and the community

can improve school effectiveness (Kuykendall, 1992). She suggests that schools form a partnership with the powerful African American churches; this relationship would assist in the development of the students' minds. The members of the churches could serve as tutors and mentors.

Parents should be available to help their children with their homework and volunteer as tutors at school. Bryant and Jones (1993) recommend that schools provide a telephone homework hot line to assist parents with their homework. The classroom teachers provide their insight:

We try to get moms and dads involved. The parents have to sign when the students read. This helps the parents to be more aware.

That's what I tell my parents when they come in. You will have to read for 15 to 20 minutes a day and I don't care what they read, just as long as they're reading something that they are interested in. You are going to see a difference in these kids.

Implications for Teacher Education Programs

It seems clear from this study that how we prepare teachers to teach African American students must continue to be explored. Among the most important systemic issues to consider is how universities prepare preservice teachers to teach in a culturally diverse environment. For example, courses should be designed to encourage teachers to look more carefully at the communication and behaviors of African American students. Student teachers should be given ample opportunity to acquire experience with students from backgrounds different from their own. During this type of experience, teachers should also examine their own behaviors and beliefs concerning African American students. Two excellent resources used by many teachers in our study were the books From Rage to Hope: Strategies for Reclaiming Black and Hispanic Students by Crystal Kuykendall and The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children by Gloria Ladson-Billings. This

type of course for teachers could assist teachers in doing a better job of educating African American students. Teacher education programs must continue to seek more substantive and research-based ways of including cultural diversity and multicultural education concepts as components of their programs.

Conclusion

The methods discussed in this study should not be considered as an exhaustive list. These represent a few identified effective methods in a wider effort to enhance the reading of African American 4th graders. Students must be literate if they are to cope in our highly technological society and to participate meaningfully in the democratic process (Hoover, Politzer, & Taylor, 1987). President Clinton's America Reads Challenge calls for all students to read independently by the end of third grade. What will happen to those fourth grade students who do not meet the President's challenge? The methods proposed throughout this article are not suggested as definitive cures to the educational problems African American students experience in today's schools, but are simply the voices of a very special group of teachers whose recommendations are supported by research.

Teachers are encouraged to approach their students in an innovative manner and to be willing to try a variety of methods in the fight against illiteracy. This study attempted to continue the quest for improved educational practices and instructional methods that can provide high quality and effective education for African American fourth grade students. However, much work remains to be done. Research is needed in such areas as fluency and small group instruction. Hopefully conclusions derived from this investigation may be used to provide a better education for African American students.

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